

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: US, UR, FR
SUBJECT: BREZHNEV'S HEALTH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.

REF: (A) STATE 154538, (B) MOSCOW 9877

SUMMARY: RECENT REPORTS ABOUT BREZHNEV FROM PARIS APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN EXAGGERATED AND SHOULD NOT BE USED AS THE BASIS FOR U.S. POLICY PROJECTIONS. BREZHNEV IS STILL IN CONTROL AND UNTIL THERE IS MORE SUBSTANTIAL EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO VIEW HIM AS THE LEADER OF SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY.

OUR CURRENT PROBLEMS IN DEALING WITH THE SOVIETS ARE NOT THE RESULT OF "INTERREGNUM" OR WEAK LEADERSHIP, BUT OF A CONSIDERED CONSENSUS AMONG THE LEADERSHIP -- AND ONE WHICH BREZHNEV SHARES. HENCE, WE SHOULD LESSEN OUR EXPECTATIONS FOR QUICK PROGRESS IN THE COMING MONTHS, BUT WE SHOULD NOT LOWER OUR POLICY GOALS. FINALLY, WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE "MOSCOW CHANNEL" MORE FULLY UTILIZED SINCE IT GIVES THE U.S. ITS ONLY DIRECT LOOK AT THE AGING SOVIET LEADERSHIP AND INSURES THAT U.S. VIEWS ARE COMMUNICATED DIRECTLY TO THE SOVIETS WHO COUNT. END SUMMARY.

1. WE HAVE READ WITH INTEREST REF A COMMENTS ON THE
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IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. OF BREZHNEV'S HEALTH.

2. BY SEPTELS WE HAVE REPORTED THE AMBASSADOR'S RECENT CLOSE OBSERVATIONS OF BREZHNEV'S APPEARANCE ON JULY 5 AND 8. FROM THESE IT IS EVIDENT THAT THE ALARMIST REPORTS FROM PARIS ABOUT THE POOR PERFORMANCE OF BREZHNEV MUST BE HEAVILY QUALIFIED IF NOT ENTIRELY DISCOUNTED. IN THIS

REGARD FRENCH AMBASSADOR DE LEUSSE RECENTLY ARRIVED BACK HERE FROM PARIS WHERE HE PARTICIPATED IN THE BREZHNEV VISIT. HE REPORTS THAT BREZHNEV, WHILE NOT IN GOOD SHAPE, WAS NOT IN PARTICULARLY POOR SHAPE EITHER. HE DID HAVE TROUBLE WALKING, ESPECIALLY ON STAIRS, AND HE APPEARED TO BE ON SOME KIND OF MEDICATION, BUT DE LEUSSE FELT THAT HE HAD BEEN ALERT THROUGHOUT HIS STAY AND THAT HE PROBABLY WOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE SIMILAR VISITS ELSEWHERE.

3. WE AGREE WITH REF A THAT BREZHNEV SUFFERS FROM A HOST OF PHYSICAL AILMENTS AND THAT HIS PERFORMANCES, BOTH IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE, ARE QUITE VARIED WITH UPS AND DOWNS, OCCASIONALLY OF A STARTLING NATURE. ADMITTEDLY HE COULD DROP DEAD TOMORROW. NONETHELESS, WE SEE NO EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE CONTENTION THAT THESE PHYSICAL INFIRMITIES (SEMI-IMMOBILISM, LACK OF STAMINA, DIFFICULTY IN CONCENTRATING AND SPEECH DEFECTS) NOW ADD UP TO A PERIOD OF "INTERREGNUM", OR "WEAK LEADERSHIP-CUM-SUCCESSION" AS SUGGESTED IN REFTEL A. (TO CITE JUST ONE EXAMPLE, NEITHER BREZHNEV'S APPEARANCE NOR THE OTHER ASPECTS OF PODGORNYY'S RECENT DEPARTURE REVEAL THE EXTERNAL SIGNS OF INTERREGNUM OR A SUCCESSION STRUGGLE.)

4. THERE IS A QUANTUM LEAP INVOLVED IN SUCH A POSTULATION
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WHICH SHOULD BE MADE ONLY AFTER MUCH MORE CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE THAN WE HAVE NOW. INDEED, THE CUMULATIVE EVIDENCE WHICH WE HAVE HERE SEEMS TO SHOW THAT BREZHNEV IS STILL IN CONTROL AND WE WOULD NOT BE SURPRISED IF HE REMAINS SO FOR A FEW MORE YEARS. NATURALLY, AT SEVENTY, HE IS NOT AS VIGOROUS AS BEFORE AND IS PROBABLY MORE RELIANT ON HIS ADVISORS TO DO PREPARATORY AND FOLLOW-UP WORK. HE IS APPARENTLY MORE RELIANT ON GROMYKO IN FOREIGN POLICY MATTERS -- BUT NOT OVERLY SO. IN SHORT, BREZHNEV IS AN OLD MAN, NOT A VEGETABLE.

5. NEITHER DO WE AGREE WITH THE ASSUMPTION IMPLICIT IN REF A THAT THE "SUCCESSION" STRUGGLE AND THE INFLUENCE OF HARD-LINE ADVISORS IS SIGNIFICANTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CURRENT LOW STATE OF OUR RELATIONSHIP. ON THE CONTRARY, WE BELIEVE SUCH AN ASSUMPTION IS HAZARDOUS IF IT IS INTERPRETED TO SUGGEST THAT WE SHOULD WORK LESS HARD AT TRYING TO BETTER THE SITUATION, AND TO FIND A WAY AROUND THE PRESENT IMPASSE. IN OUR OPINION, THE PRESENT CONDITION IS NOT A RESULT OF PERSONALITIES, HEALTH OR

POWER STRUGGLES; IT IS BASED ON A CONSIDERED AND COLLECTIVELY SHARED CONSENSUS WITHIN THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP ON THE BEST WAY TO DEAL WITH THE POLICIES OF THE NEW AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT BREZHNEV DID NOT TAKE A LEADING ROLE IN REACHING THIS CONSENSUS AND THERE IS MUCH EVIDENCE TO SHOW THAT WHETHER HE LED THE MOVE OR NOT, HE IS IN FULL AGREEMENT WITH THE CONSENSUS.

6. IT IS OUR SENSE OF THIS COLLECTIVE CONSENSUS -- NOT BREZHNEV'S HEALTH -- WHICH LEADS US TO AGREE THAT WE SHOULD LOWER OUR EXPECTATIONS OF RAPID PROGRESS IN KEY AREAS OF U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS, BUT THAT DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE SHOULD LOWER OUR SIGHTS OR THAT WE
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MUST DEMAND LESS FROM THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP THAN WE HAVE UP TO THE PRESENT. NOR SHOULD WE ATTEMPT TO TALK PAST BREZHNEV TO SOME UNKNOWN GREY EMINENCE(S) BEHIND HIM IN THE HOPE OF INFLUENCING THE SUCCESSION. THIS IS AN AREA WHERE WE ARE ILL-EQUIPPED TO OPERATE UNTIL IT BECOMES APPARENT THAT BREZHNEV'S POLITBURO COLLEAGUES HAVE DECIDED THAT HE IS TOO FAR GONE TO DEAL WITH THE MAJOR ISSUES.

7. AGAIN IT FOLLOWS FROM THE ABOVE THAT WE SHOULD NOT TRY FOR A LIMITED SALT II AGREEMENT PRIMARILY BECAUSE WE THINK BREZHNEV WILL BE LEAVING THE SCENE. THERE MAY BE GOOD REASONS FOR AN EARLY, LIMITED SALT AGREEMENT, BUT BREZHNEV'S HEALTH AND POSSIBLE DEMISE ARE NOT AMONG THEM. IN THIS CONNECTION THE EMBASSY NOTES THAT WE HAVE IN THE PAST PLACED OURSELVES UNDER A VARIETY OF SELF-IMPOSED DEADLINES IN DEALING WITH THE SOVIETS WITHOUT ANY GREAT BENEFITS ACCRUING TO US.

8. WE AGREE WITH REFTEL A COMMENTS (PARA 12) ON CHINA AND WOULD ADD THAT IN OUR OPINION IN THE ABSENCE OF IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE OF SOVIET INTENT TO THREATEN OUR SECURITY INTERESTS WE SHOULD ESCHEW ANY FORM OF MILITARY RELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA (ALL THE MORE SO WHEN THE PRC SEEMS UNWILLING TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS WITH US ON ANY BUT THEIR OWN TERMS). EVEN THE SLIGHTEST MARGINAL MOVE TOWARD A MILITARY RELATIONSHIP WITH PEKING WOULD HAVE TREMENDOUS SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE FOR MOSCOW.

9. WE EMPHATICALLY AGREE THAT WE MUST OPEN NEW LINES OF COMMUNICATION HERE IN MOSCOW (REF A, PARA 13). THIS, IN OUR OPINION, IS POSSIBLE ONLY IF WE ARE
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WILLING AND ABLE TO USE OUR MAIN LEVER IN THIS REGARD, I.E., CONTROL OF SOVIET EMBASSY ACCESS IN WASHINGTON, DOBRYNIN'S ACCESS IN PARTICULAR. IN THIS REGARD WE BELIEVE THAT IN ADDITION TO REGULATING DOBRYNIN'S ACCESS, WE MUST ALSO REGULATE THE AMOUNT OF INFORMATION GIVEN HIM SO AS TO AVOID SITUATIONS SUCH AS HAPPENED NOT LONG AGO WHEN A HIGH MFA OFFICIAL ASKED THE AMBASSADOR IF HE REALLY THOUGHT HE COULD TELL THE SOVIETS ANYTHING MORE THAN DOBRYNIN HAD ALREADY LEARNED IN WASHINGTON ABOUT A PARTICULAR MIDDLE EAST MATTER. SUCH AN ATTITUDE CAN ONLY MEAN THAT WE ARE TELLING THE SOVIETS SO MUCH IN WASHINGTON THAT THEY SEE NO NEED TO USE THE MOSCOW CHANNEL. IF WE HOPE TO SEE SOVIET LEADERS (OR FOR THAT MATTER HIGH-LEVEL MFA OFFICIALS), WE HAVE TO HAVE SOMETHING TO GIVE THEM THAT THEY CANNOT GET IN WASHINGTON. TOON

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